

## **The Impact of Wildlife Prairie Park on Peoria**

Casmee Reyes  
Washington Gifted School, Peoria  
Teachers: Mindy Jurgia and Janelle Dies

Parks are places in which children are able to play while their parents are relaxing and taking a breath of fresh air. Though recreation is one purpose, state parks also have many other purposes. Wildlife Prairie Park is an example of a park that has multiple intentions. Its goals are to conserve, educate others about nature, and to provide a clean and enjoyable atmosphere. Though the park itself looks simple and uncomplicated, its history is intricate. As a result, Wildlife Prairie Park is viewed by many as simply a reserve for animals, but by examining its complex past and countless struggles, one will see how it has shaped Peoria history.

Throughout the years, Wildlife Prairie Park has faced many challenges and obstacles. Examples are competition, employment, and funding. What proved to be the most difficult challenge for Wildlife Prairie Park, however, was the state turnover. Since its founding in 1978, Bill Rutherford, the park's founder and owner, had been striving to transfer Wildlife Prairie to the state. This, however, was complicated due to several factors. The first was cost. Another conflict that extended the time for the takeover was a misunderstanding between Bill Rutherford and the park district. The disagreement was mainly on the terms for the takeover by the state park district and what appeared to be disinterest in the property. The people also created an issue. Some believed that Wildlife Prairie Park lacked 'national significance' for it to be a state park. Those problems, hold-ups, and differences had negative effects on Wildlife Prairie Park. Initially, it failed to become an affiliate of the National Park Association in 1987. Because it was denied state

status, Wildlife Prairie Park remained virtually unknown outside of Peoria. The lack of publicity was a negative effect mainly because Peoria's tourism decreased. Closure was a great possibility then because the park cost the Forest Park Foundation more than what the foundation was gaining, and Rutherford could have decided to let the park go. The closing of Wildlife Prairie Park would have changed Illinois in many ways. To begin with, closing one of Peoria's biggest attractions would result in a loss of tourism dollars in the state. Additionally, the state would have to spend more money on the park because it could not be left unattended.

In order to end the conflicts and to make Wildlife Prairie Park acknowledged state-wide, the park board and Bill Rutherford compromised. The compromise was that Wildlife Prairie Park would not be an official state park as of yet, but they would publicize it through publication, broadcast, and other means of promotion. Next, the park district and Rutherford worked out funding solutions. A funding structure, which planned to make Wildlife Prairie Park a part of a tax-supported base directed through a zoological society that corresponded with other legislators and previous government structures was constructed. Another solution that was tried was newly designed license plates. By selling these plates, Wildlife Prairie Park received a percentage from the total cost of each plate; the money was then used for park renovations, to minimize the deficit amount, and to keep the park running. These solutions were important then because with the funding solutions being made, the possibility of Wildlife Prairie Park becoming a state park was possible.

With the compromises, solutions, and many years of hard work, Bill Rutherford and Wildlife Prairie Park reached its goal. After over two decades of hardship and

challenges, Wildlife Prairie Park finally became Hazel and Bill Rutherford's Wildlife Prairie State Park on September 5, 2000. This final turnover gave Wildlife Prairie State Park many new options and chances. To start, it received more publicity and visitors. It was also able to get assistance with advertisements, repairs, administrating, and financial issues. Although it was now a state park, the Forest Park Foundation continued to support Wildlife Prairie State Park. This change in ownership matters because in being a state park, Wildlife Prairie State Park gets more exposure. It also enables the park to expand and add more activities. Further improvements in its facilities also encouraged visitors to comes to this Peoria attraction.

Many questioned if Wildlife Prairie Park made a difference at all in Peoria history. Those doubts were ended when the park's economic impact on the city and perhaps the state became evident. An average of 200,000 visitors come to Wildlife Prairie Park each year. When those tourists come to the park, Illinois' tourist percentage increases. Additionally, those initially coming to see the park are able to get a view of the city of Peoria. The park not only promotes itself, it also promotes and publicizes other areas in Peoria and the state of Illinois.

In conclusion, Wildlife Prairie Park is viewed by many as simply a reserve for animals, but by examining its complex past and countless struggles, it has shaped Peoria history. Perseverance made what Wildlife Prairie Park is today. And because it stood its ground through the tough times, people across the country are able to look at a part of Illinois history. As Wildlife Prairie Park gets more well-known, more people from different places are getting to know all that the state has to offer. This is an instance which shows that the parks are one of many ways to share and promote places. [From

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